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NBC NEWS SEEKS NIXON INTERVIEW

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Watergate Would Be Part—Fee Put at Under 1-Million

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By LES BROWN

NBC News is actively pursuing an opportunity to purchase a series of interviews with former President Richard M. Nixon that would be based on his written memoirs when they are completed more than a year from now, Richard C. Wald, president of the news division, said yesterday.

Mr. Wald said that while negotiations are in progress, he could not discuss the fee asked for Mr. Nixon by Irving Lazar, the literary agent who is representing him. Told that sources at the other networks have indicated that Mr. Lazar was asking for $1-million, Mr. Wald replied, "It's not that much."

Noting that the talks with Mr. Lazar are still exploratory and that questions of editorial control, format and procedures are still to be resolved, Mr. Wald said: "We are intrigued with the proposition, especially since it is established that Nixon will discuss Watergate. I guess it is fair to say that we are coming closer to making an agreement."

In making the proposal initially to CBS News a week ago, Mr. Lazar indicated that Mr. Nixon would not be willing to discuss Watergate in the interviews. CBS rejected the offer, as did ABC News subsequently.

Both explained that they did not pursue discussions with Mr. Lazar on the proposal, even if Mr. Nixon were to relent on the Watergate aspect, because their company policies do not permit them to purchase news exclusives.

Mr. Wald said he did not consider the interviews to constitute a purchase of news since they would be an elaboration of Mr. Nixon's written memoirs.

"Every great President has written and sold his memoirs. They have great historical interest and value, whether you like the President or not," Mr. Wald said. "I view this project [illegible] discussi[illegible] the forme[illegible] about his [illegible] decisions [illegible] made [illegible] White [illegible] answering [illegible] Watergate.

Mr. Wald indica[illegible] interviews might [illegible] three programs, [illegible] even more, if an agreement were reached with Mr. Lazar. He said he could not give any specific details "until we have something" but made it clear that the company would not agree to an outsider conducting the interviews.

There had been reports from the other networks that David Frost, the British television interviewer, had been proposed as a neutral party to conduct the programs with Mr. Nixon.

CBS News had stretched its policy against paying for news exclusives earlier this year when it purchased interviews with G. Gordon Liddy, the convicted Watergate conspirator, and H. R. Haldeman, who had been Mr. Nixon's chief of staff. Mr. Haldeman was paid $100,000 for two one-hour programs.

"I'm prepared to admit that paying for the interviews was a mistake, and one that we won't make again," Richard S. Salant, president of CBS News, said yesterday.

"Aside from that," he continued, "I agree with Leon Jaworski [the special Watergate prosecutor] that Mr. Nixon owes the country an explanation for Watergate. It wouldn't be right to pay him for doing that."

Recognizing that there would be criticism from several quarters for paying a former President who was forced to resign, Mr. Wald said: "It's a very complicated question. Is it wrong for this President to write a book and sell it? Would it be wrong, then, for people to buy it? If not, then why is it wrong to publish his memoirs on television, and to pay him, just as any President has been paid for memoirs?"

Emphasizing that the talks with Mr. Lazar are in the preliminary stages and that disagreement over details could cause them to dissolve, Mr. Wald said, "All there is now is a strong possibility that we will buy what in effect are the rights to the Nixon memoirs, when they are written."